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# THE CASE FOR THE HUMANIST

PERCY HAZEN HOUSTON

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THE historic quarrel between the humanist and the modernist has entered upon another phase in the recent contentions of "experts" in the field of education. Dr. Eliot and Mr. Abraham Flexner have undertaken an offensive campaign against the forces of tradition, while the burden of defence has rested chiefly upon the shoulders of Professor Paul Shorey. The first two of these gentlemen has succeeded in making a revolutionary attack upon the bulwarks of traditional forms and methods, with a view to sweeping away all studies that cannot endure the test of clearly demonstrable usefulness.

Professor Shorey, in reply, denies flatly that there is an antithesis between discipline and content, that Latin and algebra are necessarily badly taught, that one subject is as good as another, or that the so-called "realistic" subject is sure to be beneficial or useful when handled by the ordinary uninspired teacher.

As we view this bitter quarrel between educators, we would do well to look more closely at our own failures in the profession of teaching. We ought therefore, in all humility, to recognize that when any system is under fire, as our present system has been and still is, there must be something seriously wrong with the manner in which it functions. We ought, in a word, to admit without more argument that our colleges do not really educate, that a combination of formal teaching and an over-development of student activities has very nearly killed any genuine spirit of learning, that intellectual and spiritual standards had up to the time of our entrance into the World War pretty well collapsed. Thousands of young men and young women were each year being sent out from college halls with minds untrained to hard work,

unable to handle ideas adequately or intelligently, and incapable of perceiving or revealing beauty. A hardened scholasticism on one side of the classroom desk, which reveals itself in a conventionalized curriculum and formal methods of instruction, and indifference and wrong conceptions of the meaning of education on the other side of the desk have been the chief causes of the failure. Too much wealth, too much athletics, too little seriousness of purpose, have been the faults of the students; but the presumption must always be that when the pupil refuses to learn, the teacher is somewhere at fault. Then may we not say that too little vitality infused into the teaching, too great absorption in special problems of research and too little genuine interest in the human problems before them, too formalized an instruction both in lecture and recitation, and too little endeavor to stimulate and arouse by skilful teaching are the faults of our college teachers?

We would then utter our *mea culpa* to our accusers, at the same time that we stand upright in valiant defense of our educational standards. And if we would preserve these standards, we need now to pass in review our whole teaching lives and really again *humanize* the whole apparatus. Before, however, we consider any constructive programme, there should be restated those general principles which the humanist holds as the necessary articles of his educational creed. They are, briefly, the establishment of a general body of doctrine (not dogmatically but liberally and generously) and a discipline which shall tend to serve as a bridge between the student's life in the immediate present and the rich storehouse of ideas and events which have accumulated during the progress of civilized life. By contact with this life and with other forms of thinking than his own, he may, if he is rightly directed, come to know the present placed against this background of the past, and so in a measure correct his views of current thought; for, we believe, society has no greater enemy than the man who has cut loose from these standards and judgments. To such we owe our quick improvement panaceas, our revolutionary ideas of whatever sort, including the educational, which are threatening our present society with destruction. We need to temper our light-hearted fondness for social experiment with a wholesome respect for the long and painful struggle the world has made toward creating values that it would

lightly set aside for the new and the untried. In the light of old triumphs and defeats we may gain a new focus upon the disaster we are now facing, and perhaps we may discover to our immense advantage that modern notions are not so modern after all; that they have been conceived and tried in other forms by other ages, not always with results so happy for those who would make them prevail.

More important, however, than this superior social vision afforded by closing the gap between our age and others that have gone before is the enrichment of one's mind and the deepening of all one's spiritual forces through direct and intimate contact with the great men of other ages who have offered their message in their time to the world. The freedom of the company of the purest and finest spirits who have shed their light upon their time would be a liberalizing force not to be matched by any amount of systematic lecturing upon literary and historical origins. The inquiring student may at least, in the four short years of undergraduate life, be touched by a cursory companionship with minds and souls superior to his own, and he may receive encouragement to pry further into the treasury which the wise men of other times than his have generously opened to whoever will accept their gifts. Through this same service to eager youth has many a young man been set upon the road to intellectual and spiritual salvation, as can be testified to by the many teachers who have made this happy connection between minds living and dead. This is the true reward of teaching, and there can be few greater than this.

And now, as we turn to sketch the outlines of a constructive programme that shall correspond to the thoroughly considered curriculum of the realistic school, we need to take stock of whatever we possess of worth to the life of the modern student. Would our appeal to his historical reason and his artistic imagination endure a practical test beside the study lists of the school of realism?

This programme, if it would prove its superiority not only over the practical and the vocational but also over other schemes of liberal studies, must present both a discipline and a body of knowledge capable of satisfying the insistent demands of the young man or the young woman for direct help in meeting the problems of the lives they must lead in the great world after their departure from college halls.

This help may best be afforded partly through a thorough-going revision of schedules in favor of a more uniform scheme of studies, and partly through a transformation of present methods of instruction by means of more vital personal contact between teacher and pupil. Both are of supreme importance if we would meet the inroads of the new educational theories, and each of them accordingly requires a brief treatment in turn.

The discipline which the traditional educator insists upon ought, if it is to have any vital force, to rest fundamentally upon ideas, and these ideas are to have a binding force upon all who submit to it. By seeking a common standard of training we shall bring our students together in common interests and a common knowledge. And this common knowledge is not far to seek. It is the history, the literature, the institutions of England, from whom we intellectually derive, and as a vital and necessary background for these studies, as thorough a survey as can be obtained of Greek and Roman culture.

With this as the heart of our training we may then trace the long struggle of man to form the institutions which, in spite of obvious and acute injustices, have somehow endured the stress of time. Let us know and strive to comprehend an epoch—Greece, Rome, Mediæval Europe, England, France, America—in all its phases; its history, its literature, its philosophy, its art, its science; and let us learn as we can how other peoples have faced the problems of national or racial life and what success was theirs in their toilsome progress toward the light.

To illustrate: After a more or less detailed survey of the art and literature of ancient Athens, the student might attempt some mastery of the ethical and political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle in its bearing both on the later history of Europe and as a corrective of some of our current political and philosophical thinking. Or, again, a study of the life and institutions of Rome—Roman character, Roman law, and Roman achievements in literature and statecraft—would lend itself wonderfully to the development of one's powers to live in ideas. So also the mind and temper and the discipline of France, of Italy, and above all of England as she has contributed to the body of our thinking.

As we pursue these studies of other times and peoples, the same question which Mr. Flexner has scornfully flung

at us we should accept, and endeavor to offer a reasonable answer. That is: To what extent shall the study of Latin be retained in the new curriculum? Our first reply would be that it should be retained to an extent great enough to make it of value as a disciplinary force (there is none finer, and Mr. Flexner's contention that a case cannot be made out for it may be merely ignored), and as the medium for the communication of a literature rich in the qualities most needed as a proper balance for our own inchoate literature. Latin is, in fact, too deeply woven into the woof of our cultural selves to be ripped away without serious damage to the whole fabric. Greek, we would regretfully confess, has lost its hold upon modern scholastic curricula. Though facilities for its study should be afforded, because the world cannot lose its heritage from the ancient world, emphasis must necessarily be placed upon reading the great works of the Classics in the best available translations. However much of either Latin or Greek may be read during the undergraduate course,—and the student should be encouraged to give as much time to the study of these tongues as he may feel inclined to put upon them,—every one who comes under our discipline should be required to read in translation the masterpieces of literature which the Classic world has bestowed upon us. Ideas cannot die, and the heritage that is ours, even though acquired through what is inevitably an inadequate medium, must not be thrown away through scholarly prejudice in favor of an impracticable thing. Superficial such a method may be, but at least it has the merit of partially humanizing every student who passes through our hands.

Where also shall science find a place in this new curriculum of ours? A very central and important place, we may say. We would accept science as a formulation and application of the laws of nature which we may employ according as our characters have received one sort of discipline or another. We must recognize, however, that science itself possesses no moral content, and that for this reason we should endeavor to heal the breach between science and philosophy which has so long been open. Science needs to be taught as a great field of human knowledge, a knowledge of whose laws is essential to the equipment of every cultivated man; but science humanized, science in its relation to the persistent effort of man to learn

the secrets of nature and to apply them in the service of humanity, is of far greater value to us. A sense of the limitation of the purely scientific point of view would be a matter of real value to acquire.

As has been indicated above, this reform in the subject-matter of the curriculum can have little positive result without some radical change in the manner of presenting it. Not only must the deadening influence of the lecture system in its present extreme form be destroyed and the excessive emphasis upon grades and final examinations removed, but the classroom work must in nearly every respect be remade. Mind must be laid to mind, to stimulate the young men or young women to search their souls for the stuff that is in them, to know themselves, to seek definitions of fundamental terms and answers to questions that persist in knocking at the doors of their minds and will not be denied. For this reason departmental pride must be abandoned by the teaching force and a coöperation between departments obtained that may carry the inquiring student on from subject to subject, establishing the essential unity of human knowledge and bridging the gap between courses. One friend has suggested that the instruction should be, wherever possible, peripatetic. Certainly it ought ever to be dynamic and personal, creating a genuine *rapprochement* between teacher and pupil. This of course implies the rare teacher, and the rare teacher must be sought wherever he may be found, and paid a wage commensurate with his ability.

And so, submitting to this programme of instruction and this quality of teaching, the student arrives at the last years of undergraduate life. What is, then, left for him to choose for his very own different from the choice of his fellows? There is left a certain limited specialization preparatory to his career. Would he be a lawyer, he may acquaint himself with economics and the history of jurisprudence and international law, with some familiarity with the common law of England. For medicine, he may elect chemistry and biology and psychology. In science, in literature, in history, in mathematics, he may feel free to choose whatever will help him most in the years following, which he is to devote to professional study. Even for business, which is the chosen field of the majority of our college graduates, he may find studies in economics

and sociology and law which should bring his mind down to practical affairs. But always the student, whatever his career, will be made at least partially humane by a few brief years' association with the finest thinking and the most beautiful expression of the great tradition of culture. Even the one who would seek to enter into the service of his fellows by a life of self-denial and personal sacrifice, ought to find inspiration in such an institution as we have just described. For it is service in every form that should be the final consummation of living under the guidance of these teachings, but a service tempered by knowledge, and emotion made true and steady by reason and the developed judgment. As leaders of men the graduates of this institution should go forth to give their wills to make the world better. And the message of this new Alma Mater to her children will be Plato's message of the State to its picked and trained leaders:

We have brought you into the world to be rulers of men, kings of yourselves and of the other citizens, and have educated you far better and more perfectly than they have been educated, and you are better able to share in the public duty. Wherefore each of you, when his turn comes, must go out into the world and play his part in life the better for having better seen than others what is the Beautiful, the True, and the Good.

PERCY HAZEN HOUSTON.